

County Urges Medical Professionals to Enroll

New Upgrades Improve EMAN's Alerting Capabilities

By Bruce Even and Jackie Hopkins

Imagine an envelope containing anthrax is received at a main San Diego County post office. Hundreds of people are potentially exposed. A high-priority alert is issued from the Emergency Medical Alert Network (EMAN) of San Diego County. The alert provides medical professionals throughout the County with information about who may have been exposed, clinical signs and symptoms, specimen collection and testing, and various treatment options for those exposed who may or may not yet be symptomatic.

As a participant in the new upgraded EMAN system, you are one of the first healthcare providers in the County to receive official information and guidance from the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency. EMAN first alerts you via e-mail, phone, and alpha-pager, and then direct you to the secure EMAN web portal for additional information and recommendations.

As a result of the EMAN alert, you and your staff are better prepared to screen, triage and treat the potentially numerous patients (including "worried well") that begin presenting at your healthcare facility. EMAN updates you on a regular basis as recommendations change and the situation unfolds.

Purchased with federal bioterrorism funds, EMAN's goal is to facilitate early detection of and rapid response to local communicable disease outbreaks, clusters, and other unusual disease activity, including acts of bioterrorism. Currently, the County Health and Human Services Agency is enrolling San Diego medical and public health professionals on the upgraded "real-time" alerting system, with the goal of migrating existing EMAN participants to the new system by December 2005. Current EMAN participants will be required to re-apply online at www.emansandiego.com and provide "real-time" contact information and a preferred method of contact during emergency situations. Private contact information is not available to other EMAN participants.

According to Community Epidemiology Chief, Michele Ginsberg, MD, “It’s important that medical and public health professionals, even those on the old system, be identified and registered on the upgraded system.” This includes local physicians and other healthcare professionals, especially those specializing in infectious disease, emergency medicine and primary care, among other specialties. According to EMAN Managers, Jackie Hopkins and Lacey Hicks, hospitals should ensure that at least managers and directors of hospital emergency departments, infectious disease/control programs, laboratories, pharmacies and safety programs are registered on EMAN.

EMAN alerts are issued 1-3 times per month and are categorized as high, medium or low in priority. Most EMAN alerts will continue to be sent via e-mail and relate to unusual disease occurrence and requests for enhanced public health surveillance. Medium-priority alerts are issued to announce important disease occurrence that may require prompt but not immediate action. An example might be the recognition of a newly identified disease or condition, such as SARS. High-priority alerts are issued only during public health emergencies.

In addition to the “real-time” alerting feature, the upgraded EMAN system includes a secure web portal containing current and archived EMAN alerts, an automated “search” function, communicable disease and bioterrorism information, and a directory providing business contact information for EMAN participants.

An individual username and password will now be required to access all information via EMAN. According to Jackie Hopkins, “The enhanced security of the upgraded system is a federal requirement, particularly as EMAN alerts may contain information on investigations still in progress.”

San Diego County healthcare providers are encouraged to complete the EMAN online registration form at www.emansandiego.com. Once applications are screened and approved, new EMAN participants are assigned a username and a password of their

choosing. Questions about the new upgraded EMAN system should be directed to Lacey Hicks or Jackie Hopkins of the Community Epidemiology Branch at (619) 515-6620.

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